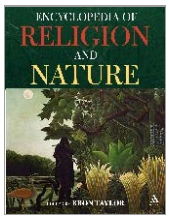
1-1-2006

Geophilia

Paul Faulstich
Pitzer College



The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature
Edited by Bron Taylor

Publisher: Continuum
Published online: 2010
eISBN: 9780199754670

Print Publication Date: 2006
Current Online Version: 2010

Geophilia

Extrapolated from E. O. Wilson's concept of biophilia, geophilia asserts that humans have an organic propensity to find wildlands emotionally compelling. It exists as a human tendency to emotionally connect with natural landscapes. While the biophilia hypothesis proposes that humans have a propensity to focus on life and lifelike processes, geophilia relates to our tendency to find compelling the landscape and its component features. This inherent inclination emotionally and spiritually to affiliate with a landscape is, perhaps, part of our evolutionary heritage, associated with genetic fitness, and related to the human propensity for symbolic reasoning. The geophilia hypothesis suggests that landscapes are compelling for humans, and exert significant influence on intellect, intuition, and action. Its cultural expressions are often complex and bear upon prospects for the preservation of wild places.

If geophilia exists as part of our species' evolutionary heritage, then it is probable that there is evolutionary advantage to emotional, intellectual, and spiritual affiliation with land. Research in this area is young, and findings have yet to appear that irrefutably support the proposition that positive response to nature has a partly genetic basis. The most convincing findings are the decisive patterns across diverse cultures, which reveal a preference for natural scenes over urban scenes, as well as the remarkable predilection for geophysical settings that presumably offered survival-related advantages for humans.

Landscape is part of the iconography of every culture. It provides an “image” of the invisible, a physical link to the creative forces contained within it. Not only are there practical bonds of subsistence between peoples and land-scapes, there are also potent religious, social, and emotional bonds. It is through these bonds that people develop a sense of place and affinities with particular locales.

Part of the human quest for meaning involves the ordering of landscape into places. Places are centers of cultural and personal meaning; they exist as foci of emotional attachment. A sense of place unfolds through the religious, moral, and aesthetic discernment of specific locations. Through the sense of place, the boundaries between person and “other” become blurred. People develop a sense of responsibility to the land, which suggests that geophilia is an important element of a land ethic.

Places are fundamental expressions of human involvement with the world. They provide foundations for existence, imparting not only a geographic context to activity, but providing physical and spiritual security and identity. Through natural places humans gain insight into their existence, for there is self-discovery in place. Landscapes are ontologically significant; people are components in the continuation of the land. An individual exists not only in relation to other individuals, but also in concert with the landscape. Through geophilia, self-and-other exist as a continuous and extended entity.

Geophilia is different from bioregionalism in that it just might be inscribed in our DNA; if it indeed exists, it expresses tens of thousands of years of evolutionary encounters with landscape. It is part of our deep psychology, and is rooted in the essential patterns of human life on Earth. Geophilia suggests that humans are *of* the land-scape, and that as a species *Homo sapiens* belongs to the land in ways profound. Geophilia reminds us that it is our nature to be resourceful and attentive to the world in which we live. Through reinhabitation we can begin to dwell in ways that respect ecological limits and engender social justice.

In contemporary industrialized cultures, wilderness as sacred space can be understood partly as expression of a land ethic informed by a deferred geophilic response to nature. On some level – perhaps deeply subconscious – geophilia is the motivating force behind the establishment of wildlife refuges, national parks and other conservation lands, and a variety of sacred sites.

Various research projects have documented humankind's strong preference for natural settings, and the literature in environmental perception is rich with examples. People give aesthetic preference to landscapes in which they can function effectively. People tend to prefer, for example, landscapes with water features, trees with broad canopies, and both panoramic views and sheltered refuges. Aesthetic reactions, then, are not trivial; indeed, they form a template for human behavior that is both ancient and far-reaching.

People in both Western and Eastern societies consistently dislike spatially restricted environments but respond positively to landscapes with moderate to high visual depth. This preference can perhaps be related to our common evolutionary heritage in which our hominid ancestors found abundant plant and animal food on the savannah, as well as lower risk because of visual openness and escape opportunities. Modern humans prefer land-scapes with savannah-like properties such as openness, scattered trees, and grassy ground cover, and this may be a partly genetic predisposition. Biology tells us that non-human vertebrates show a widespread preference for the kind of environments in which their species prospers. Humans, too, express

aesthetic preference for habitats conducive to survival, which suggests that geophilia is a characteristic of our species.

Land is the organic, emotional, and aspirational core of culture. Peoples from diverse geographical regions and cultural traditions express geophilia (or something close to it) through religion; their myths, rituals, totemism, sacred sites, and the like. For many indigenous peoples, this shared identity is sagaciously articulated through the mythologies, wherein people, spirit-beings, natural species, and localities are viewed as interconnected. This extension of self onto landscape enables the articulation of personal traits in terms of graspable phenomena. Not only is landscape understood as the material manifestation of the highest values and ideals, but it is also understood as a psychological and physiological continuance of the individual.

Rituals and myths arouse emotions; they heighten awareness, bring fresh insight, and enable us to become conscious of connections between the world and ourselves. People construct mythologies to fit the land; to affirm and express their place in the world. In the industrialized world, the substitution of these Earth-based mythologies for materialism parallels the loss of fundamental contact with the land, and it relates to a host of problems that are becoming increasingly apparent and dangerous. Often, our solutions are inadequate to solve the ecological problems facing us – the very directions of our thoughts and policies repeatedly lead us deeper into trouble. Any solution derived from the same paradigm as the problem seems only to worsen things. Moreover, our emotions are no longer structured to make us *want* to deal adequately with those problems. We seem unable to stop desiring the very things that are destroying the world we long to treat with respect.

Geophobia, the corollary of geophilia, is the fearful response to landscapes. In some cases, geophobic responses sharpen perceptions and make us physically and emotionally more agile; fear of exposed heights and dark caves have, in some instances, adaptive value. Geophobia may correlate with some sacred sites (special caves, mountains, etc.) through the notion that visiting these sites by overcoming our earthly fears can bring us closer to spiritual enlightenment. Mediating between the ancestral realm and the human realm, such landscapes serve as indexes of sacred as well as secular events.

Geophilia may provide the basis for the ethics of both radical ecology and mainstream environmentalism. Radical ecology purports to be largely altruistic, concerned with preserving the *intrinsic integrity* of nature. Mainstream environmentalism, on the other hand, is most concerned with preserving the *utilitarian value* of nature. Combining the strands of these two perspectives, an ethic based on our affinity for landscape can be understood partly as an ethic of altruistic selfishness.

Paul Faulstich

Further Reading

Faulstich, Paul. "*Geophilia: Landscape and Humanity.*" *Wild Earth* 8:1 (1998), 81–9.
Find this resource:

Kaplan, Rachel and Stephen Kaplan. *The Experience of Nature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
Find this resource:

Kellert, Stephen R. and Edward O. Wilson. *The Biophilia Hypothesis*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1993.
Find this resource:

Tuan, Yi-Fu. *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974.
Find this resource:

Wilson, Edward O. *Biophilia*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984.
Find this resource:

See also: Biophilia; Bioregionalism (various); Biosphere Reserves and World Heritage Sites; Conservation Biology; Wilson, Edward O..